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## RUBENS.

PETER PAUL RUBENS, the great luminary and centre of the Flemish system of art, was of a distinguished family at Antwerp, at that time a school of classical and religious learning, and the emporium of the western world. Here, from his infancy, he was educated, with great care, in every branch of polite literature; and his genius met these advantages with an ardour and success, of which the ordinary course of things furnishes us with no parallel. At the age of nineteen he seriously applied himself to painting under the tuition of Otho Venius, and, a very few years afterwards, we find him in Italy, possessed of unbounded powers, both in the theory and practice of his art, and working more as the rival than the pupil of those masters whose works had been selected as the objects of his imitation.

Both the number and merits of the works of Rubens, as well as his uncommon success in life, are calculated to excite extraordinary attention: his fame is extended over a large part of the continent without a rival; and it may truly be said, that he has enriched his country, not only by the magnificent examples of art which he left, but also by what some may deem a more solid advantage, the wealth which continued till lately to be drawn into it by the concourse of strangers from all parts of the world to view them.

To the city of Düsseldorf he has been an equal benefactor, as the gallery there would at least lose half its value were his performances alone to be withdrawn from it. Paris, also, owes to him a large part of its attraction; and, if to these we add the many towns, churches, and private cabinets whereon a single picture or sketch of Rubens often confers distinction, who shall dispute his legitimate claim to be ranked with the most illustrious names in his profession?

Rubens is not, says Opie, one of those regular and timid composers, who escape censure and deserve no praise. He produces no faultless monsters; his works abound with defects, as well as beauties, and are liable, by their daring eccentricities, to provoke much criticism. But they have, nevertheless, that peculiar property, always the companion of true genius, that which seizes on the spectator, commands attention, and enforces admiration in spite of all their faults. "To the want of this fascinating power" (says Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his *Journey through Flanders*), "it is owing, that the performances of those painters, by which he is surrounded, such as the altar-pieces of Crayer, Schut, Segers, Huysum, Tyssens, Van Balen, and others, though they have, perhaps, fewer defects, appear spiritless and insipid in comparison: they are men, whose hands, and indeed all their faculties, appear to be 'cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd,' and their performances, however tolerable in some respects, are too evidently the effect of merely careful and laborious diligence."

The productions of Rubens, on the contrary, seem to flow from his pencil with more than freedom, with *prodigality*; his mind was inexhaustible, his hand was never wearied; the exuberant fertility of his imagination was, therefore, always accompanied by a correspondent spirit in the execution of his work:—

"Led by some rule which guides but not constrains,  
He finish'd more through happiness than pains."

No man ever more completely laid the reins on the neck of his inclinations, no man ever more fearlessly abandoned himself to his own sensations, and, depending on them, dared to attempt extraordinary things, than Rubens. To this, in a great measure, must be attributed that perfect originality of manner, by which the limits of the art may be said to be extended. Endowed with a full comprehension of his own character, he waited not a moment for the acquisition of what he perhaps deemed incompatible excellence: his theory once formed, he seldom looked abroad for assistance; there is, consequently, in his works very little that appears to be taken from other masters, and, if he has occasionally stolen anything, he has so well digested and adapted it to the rest of his composition, that the theft is not discoverable. But, though

it must be allowed that he possessed, in many respects, the true art of imitation, though he looked at nature with a true painter's eye, and saw at once the characteristic feature by which every object is distinguished, and rendered it at once on canvas with a vivacity of touch truly astonishing; though his powers of grouping and combining his objects into a whole, and forming his masses of light and shade, and colour, have never been equalled; and though the general animation and energy of his attitudes, and the flowing liberty of his outline, all contribute to arrest the attention, and inspire a portion of that enthusiasm by which the painter was absorbed and carried away, yet the spectator will at last awake from the trance, his eyes will cease to be dazzled, and then he will not fail to lament that such extraordinary powers were so often misapplied, if not entirely cast away; he will inquire why Rubens was content to want so many requisites to the perfection of art, why he paid no greater attention to elegance and correctness of form, to grace, beauty, dignity, and propriety of character,—why every subject, of whatever class, is equally adorned with the gay colours of spring, and every figure in his compositions indiscriminately fed on roses. Nor will he, we fear, be satisfied with the ingenious, but surely unfounded apology, that these faults harmonise with his style, and were necessary to its complete uniformity; that his taste in design appears to correspond better with his colouring and composition than if he had adopted a more correct and refined style of drawing; and that, perhaps, in painting, as in personal attractions, there is a certain agreement and correspondence of parts in the whole together, which is often more captivating than mere regular beauty.

Let these remarks should be thought too severe on this illustrious man, we shall extract from the works of the great critic, Sir Joshua Reynolds, his description of the picture of "The Fallen Angels," by Rubens, now in the gallery at Düsseldorf:—"It is impossible, without having seen this picture, to form an adequate idea of the powers of Rubens. He seems here to have given loose to the most capricious imagination in the attitudes and invention of the falling angels who are tumbling

'With hideous ruin and combustion, down  
To bottomless perdition.'

"If we consider the fruitfulness of invention discovered in this work, or the skill which is shown in composing such an infinite number of figures, or the art in the distribution of the light and shadow, the freedom and facility with which it seems to be performed, and, what is still more extraordinary, the correctness and admirable taste of drawing of foreshortened figures in attitudes the most difficult to execute, we must pronounce this picture to be one of the greatest efforts of genius that ever the art of painting has produced."

His universality is another striking trait in the character of Rubens. In the smallest sketch, the lightness and transparency of his touch and colour are no less remarkable than the sweeping rapidity and force of his brush in his largest works; and, in all kinds of subjects, he equally keeps up his wonted superiority. His animals, particularly his lions and horses, are so admirable, that it may be said they were never properly, at least, poetically, painted but by him. His portraits rank with the best works of those painters who have made that branch of art their sole study; the same may be said of his landscapes: and though Claude Lorraine finished more neatly, as became a professor in a particular branch, yet there is such an airiness and facility in the landscapes of Rubens, that a painter would as soon wish to be the author of them as those of Claude, or any other artist whatever.

Rubens, like Titian, was caressed, honoured, employed, and splendidly rewarded by several crowned heads, and even deputed in a ministerial capacity, by the king of Spain, to make confidential overtures to the court of London, where he was knighted by Charles I., and had every possible mark of respect shown to him, on account of his unrivalled excellence in his profession. At his return to Flanders he was honoured

with the post of secretary of state, and in that office he continued till his death, which was brought on by the gout, at the age of sixty-three. He is said to have shown the ruling passion strong in death, lamenting to be taken off just as he began to be able to paint, and understand his art.

He enjoyed his good fortune with equal liberality and prudence, searching out and employing such artists as possessed merit, and were in indigent circumstances; but when visited by a famous chemist, who told him he had nearly discovered the philosopher's stone, and wished him to become a partner in his good luck, Rubens, pointing to his palette and pencils, answered, he was come too late, for that, by the help of those instruments, he had himself found the philosopher's stone some twenty years before.

In comparing Rubens with Titian, it has been observed, that the latter mingled his tints as they are in nature, that is, in such a manner as makes it impossible to discover where they begin or terminate: Rubens' method, on the contrary, was to lay his colours in their places, one by the side of the other, and afterwards very slightly mix them by a touch of the pencil. Now, as it is an acknowledged principle in the art, that the less colours are mingled the greater their purity and vivacity, and as every painter knows the latter method to be the most learned (requiring a deeper knowledge of the subject), to be attended with a greater facility, and, if properly managed, with greater truth and vivacity of effect, it must follow that this difference in their practice, which has been adduced to prove the inferiority of Rubens to Titian, indisputably proves the reverse; and though it must be allowed, perhaps, that, in practice, he at times uncovered too much the skeleton of his system, and rendered his tints too visible for a near inspection, we can have no doubt that, on the whole, he was the most profound theorist; that more may be learnt from him respecting the nature, use, and arrangement of colours than from any other master; and that had he

not been, in some measure, the dupe of his own powers, his name would have stood first in the first rank of colourists.

Rubens, like other men of his degree of eminence, produced a multitude of scholars and imitators, to whom he stood in the place of nature, and whose excellence can only be measured by their proximity to, or distance from, their great archetype. The best of their works are now probably, and not improperly, attributed to him, from whose mind the principle that directed them emanated. From him they learned to weigh the powers of every colour, and balance the proportion of every tint; but, destitute of his vigorous imagination, the knowledge of his principle became, in their hands, a mere palliative of mental imbecility (leaves without trunk), and served only to lacquer over poverty of thought and feebleness of design, and to impart a sickly magnificence to stale mythological conceits, and clumsy forms of gods without dignity, goddesses without beauty, and heroes without energy; which disgust the more for the abortive attempt to conceal, by colouring, the want of that which colour can never supply.

Such will always be the success of exclusive endeavours to copy the manner of a particular individual, however great his powers. The proper use, continues Opie, of the study of our predecessors is to open and enlarge the mind, facilitate our labours, and give us the result of the selection made by them of what is grand, beautiful, and striking, in nature. A painter, therefore, ought to consider, compare, and weigh in the balance of reason, the different styles of all distinguished masters; and, whatever mode of execution he may choose to adopt, his imitation should always be general, and directed only to what is truly excellent in each: he may follow the same road, but not tread in the same footsteps; otherwise, to borrow a metaphor from a celebrated artist of former days, instead of the child, he will be more likely to become the *grandchild* of nature.

## A GOSSIP ABOUT ART AND ARTISTS.

UNDER a title like this, a man of any imagination, talent, or love of art, might write a volume. On the present occasion, however, a volume is not required, and therefore it will be necessary to say what we have to say in as brief a manner as possible; not, however, that the subject demands brevity, but rather that the space compels it.

We enter a picture-gallery; we stand, perchance, alone in the silent room; on all sides are evidences of genius and power, and we pause entranced before them. A feeling something akin to that experienced when listening to beautiful music,—a world of memory and association beyond the world of consciousness and fact,—comes gently across the senses, and we yield to the charm of the place without effort or remorse.

This, however, is only the feeling of the moment. In a little while the curiosity of the spectator overcomes the awe of the mere visitor, and he begins to examine with attention the details of the various pictures around him. In just this way the searcher after art-truth approaches his subject. At first he is astounded at the vastness of its dimensions, and is inclined rather to acknowledge its mysticism and strange power than to attempt the elucidation of the mystery or to dream of overcoming its difficulties. Soon, however, his mind becomes more and more familiarised with the aspect of things, and he is enabled first to dissect, and finally to comprehend, his sensations. And thus he is prepared to enter upon an examination of those art-triumphs which have become the glories of the world; thus is he enabled to trace the various schools of painting by their own inherent peculiarities, from the distant period when the picture over the great altar was the poor man's Bible and teacher, to the latest expositions of art-progress in the galleries of London, Paris, and Dresden; and thus in the end he becomes a disciple and lover of Art,—

being initiated into its mysteries, and becoming familiar with its many phases—rather than an outward gazer upon things incomprehensible.

Now it must be understood at once—for without this understanding both reader and writer will be apt to go astray—that the illustrations of the painter's art are not merely calculated to charm and gratify the senses, but that they are capable of refining and elevating the mind, and inspiring the heart with every good and noble sentiment. What poetry is to the ear painting is to the mind. Indeed, every painter must be more or less a poet, a creator; bringing to the surface the hidden greatnesses of human motives, and instilling into the human mind, by the exercise of his art, a love of order and harmony of design,—in fact, an admiration of the beautiful.

These are the highest manifestations of the artist's power; but if we take a somewhat lower standard of excellence,—if we look upon the painter as simply appealing to the universal heart of mankind through the feelings and sentiments common alike to the learned and the ignorant, we shall still find that every agreeable impression made by a beautiful and truthful picture, every remembrance of a natural object reproduced on the glowing canvas, every representation of the figures and countenances of those whom we have been taught to consider as among the world's great—exerts upon the mind a benign and salutary influence. Cicero, speaking of the Fine Arts, declares that “they nourish us in our youth and invigorate old age; they embellish the most fortunate situation, and console us under disasters of persecution; they accompany us day and night in our journeys and in our retreat from the world; and even when our minds are not disposed to profit by their instruction, we ought still to hold them in a just admiration, finding that to those who possess them they afford the most delicious gratifications.”